The Fourth Church Pulpit

TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: John 15:1-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." 1 Corinthians 12:7 (NRSV)

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President Clinton asked Americans to go to their places of worship last week to reflect, pray and honor Richard M. Nixon. And so we will pause for a moment to do that today.

President Nixon was a presence for many of us for most of our lives. Some of us recall his emergence on the national scene in an era that seems like another lifetime. Some of us voted for him: some against him. Some of us were grateful for his leadership and some deplored it. Scholars continue to analyze and debate his vision of the world and our nation's role in it.

Remarkably, for more than forty years, he was present: nationally and internationally.

President Clinton's words, spoken at the funeral last Wednesday, touched many of us. He said:

> "As a public man, he always seemed to believe the greatest sin was remaining passive in the face of challenges, and he never stopped living by that creed. He gave of himself with intelligence and energy and devotion to duty, and his entire country owes him a debt of gratitude for that service."

And so it is appropriate to reflect on the close of an important era in our history, in our lives, and the end of the extraordinary life of one of us. Let us pray.

Lord of all nations, and of all men and women, we give you thanks for the life of Richard M. Nixon. We thank you for his devotion to duty and his commitment to the welfare of his country. We thank you for his strength in adversity. We thank you for his involvement and participation in the life of his nation and world to the end.

We ask your blessing on his family; his daughters who stood with him with grace and courage in difficult days... comfort all those who mourn.

And bless now those who lead us: President and Mrs. Clinton and their daughter. Bless those we have elected and those who are appointed to make and administer our laws. And remind us, always, of the blessings and responsibilities that rest on us as citizens of this country and this world you love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Professor James Fowler of Emory University is one of the most distinguished developmental theorists working today. Developmental theorists ask questions about how it is that we become who we are: how do adult human beings turn out the way they turn out: what factors, forces, influences mold us and shape us and cause us to make critical decisions along our way, the end result of which is the person we become? Is it fate? Destiny? Predestination? Do we become what our parents wanted, or the opposite from what our parents wanted us to be; or what God wants, or what we want. Was it the day the teacher said, "You're never going to amount to anything," or the day another teacher said, "Young woman, you can do anything you put your mind to?"

Fowler begins his latest book with a bit of self-disclosure. He tells a story of a man "gazing out the window of his study . . . the flashing red of two cardinals played against the February snow." He was facing a major vocational decision: a real fork in the road. "Memories of those whose lives had touched his and made a difference brought tears to his eyes. He was in anguish. He prayed for help. Two paths lie open before him. He was standing on the edge of middle-age: the choice seemed a big one. One path led to institutional leadership and administrative challenge. It also promised to fulfill the boyhood dream his parents had implanted. The other involved finishing a half-written book, continuing tasks of research, teaching, writing. He could not take both paths. One had to be chosen, the other rejected, a dream denied.

"What should he do? What did he want? What did God want?"

Professor Fowler concludes:

> "For this man, as for each of us, questions of destiny and calling lay at the heart of his unfolding story as an adult." [*Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, IX/X Introduction,]

To make matters more complicated, Fowler says that the man — who is the author himself — made the decision, said "no" to the opportunities for institutional leadership, continued his writing and research — but peace did not come . . . for months, periods of pain, struggle and doubt disturbed him.

It sounds familiar, does it not? We've been there. We are there. Before each one of us lies a big question. What is my destiny? What is my calling? There is a sense in which we ask that question all our lives: as we make decisions in early adulthood about college and major and first careers: as we make mid-life decisions about where to invest ourselves, where to live, with what enterprise to make common cause: as we change careers, and then as we decide what to do with that period of time euphemistically called retirement. At the age of fifty author Frederick Buechner was still wondering out loud about what he wanted to be when he grew up.

Philosophy students are taught Immanuel Kant's three great questions in life:

> "What can we know?"
>
> "What must we do?"
>
> "What can we hope for?"

I was listening recently to a cassette tape a friend sent me. He's very ill and knows it. Instead of writing he's sending tapes to all his friends to say what he wants to say to them. And one of the things he said to me was:

> "The task ahead is to live the rest of my life intentionally, do the things I want to do, see the things I want to see (I received a postcard from Florence this week) and be with the people I want to be with, and to make a difference. I want the time I have left to matter."

It's universally true, I think. Faced with our mortality we want some sense that our lives have mattered.

It's what President Richard M. Nixon told a reporter just a few weeks ago. Looking back on his long, important and often difficult public life, the reporter asked him how he hoped to be remembered. "As a man who made a difference," he said.

And so we spend a lot of time, all our lives, thinking about it, worrying about it, agonizing over it, regretting decisions we made sometimes; "What if I had done this instead of that," said "yes" instead of "no," taken the job instead of staying put, or stayed put instead of taking the new job. And hoping that somehow we are making a difference, that our lives are adding up to something; put as simply as I know how, hoping we are doing what we are supposed to do.

The prior question, of course, is how do you know? How do you discover what you are supposed to do? Is it simply a matter of what I want to do: what feels good and right? Is the determining factor the culture's icons of success and meaning? Is it simply to earn as much as I can so I can buy everything I want? Does the one with the most toys win?

William Sloan Coffin, in his new book *A Passion For The Possible,* suggests that while our culture may talk about high ideals, it doesn't necessarily reward them. Coffin has a variation on the Kantian theme of life's important questions. The first really big decision we have to make he says, usually in college, is what to park — our ideals or our ambition. We discover, fairly quickly, that while making the world a better place sounds wonderful, it doesn't often pay very much. You may want to make a difference by teaching school in an area where social disintegration, violence, poverty and drugs characterize daily life and I don't know any better way to do it. But you need to adjust to the idea of personal financial limits. You can make a lot more money doing less stressful and dangerous jobs than teaching school in the city. And so, Coffin says, we go with our ambition and learn to call it "self-actualization" and pack our ideals in a closet where we hope our children will find them some day.

Coffin is a little rough on us, I think. It's my experience that a lot of people are still trying to do it, that it is not quite that clear for most of us: that we continue to hope that we can harness our ambition to our ideals and make a difference in whatever it is we do. But we think about it and worry about it and struggle with it all our lives.

Christian faith has an idea that is useful. In fact, it is a rather bold suggestion: some might even consider it radical. It is that there is something for each one of us to do: that each is supposed to do something. And what that something is can be determined on the basis of knowing what you are able to do: what gifts you have been given. Now we wish the process of discerning what we are supposed to do was simpler than that. Christian people keep wanting the heavens to open and the hand of God to reach down and point the way as it happens in the movies and in the stories of others — for the voice of God, sounding like Charleton Heston, of course, to say — "Go be a preacher. Go be a teacher. Go drive a bus. Go make a home."

It is not, I would submit, simple at all. The most treacherous moment in the process of becoming a minister used to be the question, "In your heart, do you know yourself called by God?" and most of us said "yes" and meant "I think so, I hope so." But I wish God would be a little more direct, but "no" as a matter of fact, God has not spoken in a clear and certain voice and said, "Go to serving." It is not simple at all. It is not always — not often clear. I don't doubt the authenticity of other's experiences who have heard the voice of God and know beyond a shadow of a doubt what they are supposed to do. But I don't think it happens that way often. I think God wants a little effort, maybe even hopes we'll continue to struggle with it, maybe thinks we'll turn out better if we keep asking whether or not this is it for me, maybe even has in mind that we'll figure out how to answer a number of ways during the course of our lives.

But you get to the topic, you approach the answer by assessing what you can do. "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good" is the way St. Paul put it twenty centuries ago. So the idea is old — each is given a gift for the common good: each one has something to do.

The situation to which Paul wrote those words was a church fight, something Presbyterians ought to be able to understand. We often become eloquent and creative when we're trying to resolve our differences. Paul had spent months in Corinth, a bustling, cosmopolitan seaport town which boasted a booming economy, lively trade, the gorgeous Temple to Apollo and the best sacred prostitutes in the region, housed in a temple on the top of an enormous mountain outcrop just outside of town. I used to hate it when the preacher would drop into sermons references to his/her recent travel. It seemed like it happened in every sermon I heard when I was younger . . . and my travel was confined driving to meetings in the south part of the Presbytery. You know, "When I was in Jerusalem . . .," "the last time I was in Rome . . .," or "As I looked at the stars leaning on the deck rail on the Q.E. II. . . ." But I now know that when you've been to Corinth it is impossible to preach on this passage and not say, "When I was in Corinth last spring. . . ." So when I was in Corinth last April, I saw the ruins of the Temple to Apollo ill standing there. You can walk on the streets and see the foundations and doorways of the shops. There was a public disturbance once and Paul had been called to account and forced to defend himself in a court in front of the proconsul Gallio. You can see the spot — The Baema — where the defendants made their case, the place the archeologists assure the tourist St. Paul stood to defend the Gospel of Christ. What impressed me most was the sense

that the first Christian churches lived in the middle of the city. They met in the Synagogue in Corinth — the location and remains of which are still there and then, as part of the public disruption, they were asked to leave. And it's all there, along with the sense that their faith interacted daily with the life of the city: that they had to figure out how to serve Jesus Christ faithfully while they continued their lives as tentmakers and farmers and shop keepers and lawyers and silver smiths and mothers and fathers.

The fight got going over the matter of who was more important than whom in the church, whose spiritual gifts pleased God the most: the teachers or healers or scholars or preachers. Paul had moved to Ephesus by then and wrote a letter back to his arguing friends because things were getting hot in Corinth and he said, "Each of you has a gift for the common good." None is more important to God than any other.

The ink was barely dry on Paul's letter when we forgot the radical idea and put in its place a more traditional and comfortable one: namely that God calls some people to service, but ignores most: that in the economy of the church, at least, there are professionals who are called by God and given important gifts, and amateurs, laypeople, who are pretty much left up to their own devices when it comes to deciding what to do with their lives . . . almost as if it doesn't matter to God once enough clergy are recruited.

It is a disastrous notion. Pushed to its logical extreme as it was in the years just prior to the Protestant Reformation it means that religion is a kind of clergy show which laity are invited to watch on occasion and, of course, pay for. In our time, it makes clergy the management team of a business whose product is spirituality and whose customers are you — our market who we hope to capture and persuade to stop shopping around and demonstrate some brand loyalty for once!

At the heart of the cultural revolution we know as the Reformation was the idea that God has work for each of us to do and none is more essential, more precious than any other.

One expression of that radical Reformation principle is in the ordination and installation of lay people to office in the church. The laying on of hands — not just on clergy — but on men and women chosen because of their gifts, to do certain tasks for the common good.

But that's only half of it and by no means the most radical half. Each has a gift. Everyone has work to do.

When ministers start talking like that laypeople start backing away.

In a delightful new book Barbara Brown Taylor says the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers sounds to lay people simply like more work. She remembers telling a member of her Episcopal parish about the ministry of the laity and how critical it was and the woman said, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to be that important." [*The Preaching Life*, p. 28]

Taylor suggests that becoming an ordained clergyperson may be the easiest way to respond to God's call: that, in many ways, a more arduous and challenging assignment is to be faithful to God, where you are, doing what you do.

The woman who thought the ministry of the laity means doing more church work needs to hear a radical idea, namely that:

> ". . . her ministry might involve being who she already is and doing just what she already does — with one difference: namely that she understand herself to be God's person in and for the world." [p. 28]

The biggest issue for each of us is discovering what we are meant to do and then doing it — for the common good, for the glory of God. It means that we have to see differently, to see our hands doing work God wants done in the world.

It is the difference, Bill Coffin says, between having a career and having a calling.

> "A career," he says, "seeks to be successful, a calling to be valuable. A career tries to make money, a calling tries to make a difference." [p. 77]

Jesus called people to follow him. Some did by dropping their nets and doing something altogether different for the rest of their lives. Others followed him by returning to what they were doing — returning to their ordinary lives, with an extraordinary difference: now they were his, his men and women whose labors, whose jobs in the world, whose responsibilities for their children and their families, their communities, their institutions — they now exercised for the common good and the service of their Lord.

The world had never seen anything quite like that before — men and women doing their work with a sense of divine purpose and blessing; working as Christ's men and women. This world has never been the same, actually.

We ask all our lives . . . What shall we do? What are we supposed to do? What is the work God has for me to do?

May I suggest that God has work for you to do because God has given each of you, each of us, special gifts: unique capacities and skills which the common good needs. Never doubt that. Never doubt that you have gifts and therefore work to do. It may be what you are already doing. It may be something altogether different. It may be what you do for a living, and it may be what you do for a living allows you to afford to do in your spare time.

It may be your art, your craft, your ability to balance an account, mop a floor, write a brief, change a diaper, run a company, teach a class, or replace a hip. It may be to run a race, play the organ, paint a picture, sing an anthem, shoot a ball through a hoop. It may be to chair a committee, raise money, bake cookies. It may be to listen to your friend whose life is falling apart, stand with your neighbor whose wife just died, talk on the phone to your aging parents who need to know every day that someone is still there for them. It may be to love your child. It may be to attend to the children of your neighborhood, city, nation. It is, all of it, Holy Week, blessed by God, needed by God, necessary for God's work to be done.

You and I are given gifts by God — to use, to spend out, to invest, to give away, and with which to make a difference.

The process of doing that is our calling, our vocation, the work God has for us.

The matter is always before us — work and faith. Sometimes they come very close, almost converging as in a lovely description Kathleen Norris, poet, author, includes in her book *Dakota, A Spiritual Geography.*

The new minister had conducted a funeral for one of the members and now people gathered at the graveside.

> "The men, some kneeling, began studying the open grave. It was early November, and someone explained that they were checking the frost and moisture levels in the ground. They were farmers and ranchers and they worried about a drought. They were mourners giving a good friend back to the earth. They were people of earth, looking for a sign of hope." [p. 175-176]

And, I thought, they were people of faith, who knew deep within themselves, that each of us has good work to do — and that among God's good gifts, nothing is more precious than to know what our work is and to do it . . . for the common good, for the glory of God, for the service of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.